

The King of Hawkins High by el_spirito

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Summary:

Just some missing scenes/an episode tag to the season finale because Steve got the crap beat out of him and there were just so many opportunities for our strange little family to bond and angst and persevere together. Featuring slightly-delirious-but-still-a-mom Steve, protective Dustin, snarky children, and paternal Hopper, among other things.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

Special thanks to my betas, 221Browncoat and Kass for pointing out my mistakes and encouraging me and also for joining me in my love of Steve freaking Harrington.

Also, my tumblr username is elspirit023. Come freak out with me!

They're all quiet for a second after Max holds her brother's keys up and says they should go, probably because Steve Harrington just got the everloving *shit* beat out of him, before Mike and Lucas and Max all start talking at once. Dustin, for his part, kneels down next to Steve, blinking rapidly as he takes in the blood and the swelling and the skin that's already darkening.

"Wait, you can *drive*?"

"We need to get some stuff before we go. We're going to need goggles, and gasoline, and-"

"Of course I can drive, I'm the zoomer!"

"-and Dustin can get some bandanas."

"Whoa whoa whoa, slow down!" Dustin yells, and it actually works to stop the chaos. "What about Steve?" he says, his hand on Steve's head. He can feel blood in the older boy's hair, but he doesn't know if it's from his head or his face.

Mike huffs. "What *about* Steve?"

"We can't just leave him here, look at him!"

They do. While they're looking he groans and Dustin helps him as he rolls over to his side and spits out a mouthful of blood, then just lays there, panting. Dustin keeps a hand on his back, feels how heavy Steve is breathing, and tries not to panic.

"I dunno," Mike says, frowning. "He'll freak out."

"He won't!" Dustin says. "He helped me with Dart no problem. He keeps his baseball bat *in his trunk*."

"He didn't want us to go," Max says.

Dustin sighs. "What if Billy wakes up? He'll kill him!"

"Billy won't wake up," Lucas says. "She injected him with the whole thing!"

"But that was Will sized, and last time I checked, Billy is a hell of a lot bigger than Will."

Steve moans unintelligibly. Dustin bites his lip. "Besides, he was injured trying to save a member of the party," he says. Lucas rubs at his neck.

"That's true," he says. Dustin thinks he's probably still more shaken than he wants to admit, and he can't really blame him. "Maybe Dustin is right."

"Okay," Mike agrees. "You get him cleaned up, and we'll get the stuff we need."

"Got it," Dustin says. Everyone starts moving at once and Dustin leans over Steve, who has maybe regained consciousness. "I'll be right back," he says, and heads straight for the kitchen. He gets a washcloth and runs it under cold water, then finds an ice pack in the freezer and grabs a bowl. When he gets back to the front room Steve has managed to almost sit upright, but he's not quite there and he's tilting to the side all funny.

"Hey, hey Steve," Dustin says, plopping down next to him. Steve looks at him, but it doesn't look very focused, like maybe he's seeing a few Dustins and can't decide which one is real. "Just hold still, okay?" He's never taken care of anyone before, and certainly not someone who looks like his face is about to fall off, so Dustin is a little terrified. Maybe more than a little.

"Dustin?" Steve says, but he doesn't really make the "t" sound and the

s sounds more like a "sh." It's a miracle Dustin can understand him at all.

"Yeah, hey buddy!" he says. "I'm just gonna wipe the blood off your face, okay? Here's a bowl if you want to, you know, spit out any more blood." Steve takes the bowl from him and clutches it with oozing knuckles, then hawks up a little glob of dark red blood. Dustin manages not to squeak. He reaches out with his cold washcloth and dabs gently at one of Steve's cheeks. Steve hisses and flinches back.

"Shit!" Dustin yelps, flinching as badly as Steve.

"S okay," Steve says and blearily waves his hand in a way that's probably meant to reassure Dustin.

"Sorry," Dustin says, and goes back in, wiping the blood off as gently as he can.

Mike comes back into the room carrying a large can of gasoline and holds out something small to Dustin. "I found these and thought they might help." A closer look reveals two tiny bandaids. Dustin grins.

"Thanks," he says. Mike nods and heads outside, and Dustin turns back to the mess of Steve Harrington's face. The two bandaids look pretty tiny in comparison. Dustin leans back, trying to decide which spots need it the most, while Steve spits out more blood and then something that looks like it might be part of a tooth.

"Huh," he says. Dustin swallows thickly.

"I'm just gonna put these bandaids on, okay?"

"Yep," Steve says, then mutters something completely beyond Dustin's powers of translation.

"What?" he says.

"Sleepy," Steve says.

"No!" Dustin yells, then takes a deep breath. "You can't sleep yet. We have to get you to the car."

"Car?" Steve repeats.

"Yep."

"Okay."

Dustin hands him the cold compress. "Put this on your face, okay? I'll be right back. And stay awake!" Steve takes it without comment and tries to press it to his face. Apparently his arms don't want to work that way, though, and he ends up just putting it on the knuckles of his right hand. Close enough.

It doesn't take long to put together Steve's backpack with everything he'll need, and then he runs it to the car along with Steve's bat.

"We're ready to go," Mike says. Max is already in the front seat, and she turns the car on while they're standing there.

"I'll help with Steve," Lucas says. They head back inside, where Steve has slumped over to his side again. He blinks blearily when they approach.

"We're gonna go out to the car now Steve, remember?" Dustin says.

"Car," Steve repeats.

"Good," Dustin says.

"Holy shit," Lucas says.

"He's okay. He's good," Dustin says. "We'll be fine." He tugs one of Steve's arms over his shoulders, and Lucas does the same on the other side. Steve moans a little.

"On three," Lucas says. They stand together on three, but Lucas pulls a little harder than Dustin, and Steve is a lot less helpful than he could be, and they nearly end up toppling to the floor before they manage to straighten out. Steve is really heavy.

They stumble outside and nearly bite it going down the one stair in front of the house, but they manage to get to the car. Mike's eyes widen when he sees them.

"Are you sure about this?" he says. Dustin nods.

"He's good," he repeats.

"How are we going to get him in the car?" Lucas says. Dustin swears passionately.

"I'll get in first and you can kind of, fold him," Mike says. "And hand him to me?"

"Yeah, that sounds good," Max says. She doesn't sound convinced.

Mike slides into the seat and Lucas lets go, so that for a second Dustin is the only thing between Steve Harrington and a faceplant into Billy's car. He stumbles and then readjusts, planting his feet. "Hey, we're gonna get in the car now, okay? So you need to duck down and get in."

Steve sways and doesn't say anything but kind of attempts to move toward the car. Dustin takes a deep breath. "I'll help you. You kind of put this shoulder in and then duck your head - not like that, whoa! - okay, you got it."

Mike helps grab him and somehow, miraculously, Steve ends up in the backseat without bashing his head in again. Dustin slides in after him and Steve immediately slumps over so that his head is resting on Dustin's shoulder and appears to pass out. Mike looks at him in alarm.

"He's okay!" Dustin says, and if his voice trembles a little bit, well, no one comments on it. He gets the cold compress and presses it to Steve's forehead just as Max floors it and they take off with a lurch. "We'll be fine," Dustin mutters to himself. "We're okay."

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Dustin is pretty sure adrenaline is the only thing that keeps Steve not only on his feet but leading the way through the tunnels, but whatever it is, Dustin is grateful for it. He'd never admit it aloud, but it's a tiny bit comforting to have the older boy there in case of demo-dog attack. Not that the party couldn't handle it without him, of course.

They make it back to the rope with only a run-in with D'Artagnan - and Dustin isn't one to say I told you so, but he might say it a few times once they're safely out of the tunnels - and Steve lifts the others up into the pumpkin patch. He's about to grab Dustin when they hear the demo-dogs coming. Steve shoves him behind him and stands with his bat up like the superhero he basically is, but they're probably dead anyway.

Then the demo-dogs come barrelling past them, nearly sending Dustin to the ground until a strong arm grabs him around the chest and steadies him. He hears Mike yell in excitement from up above and Dustin can't help but grin. They're not getting eaten today, no sir.

"We did it!" he yells, and feels Steve's hand tighten.

"We sure did, buddy," he says. Then the demo-dogs are gone, and it's just him and Steve. "You ready?" Steve says, holding out the rope. Dustin nods - he is *more* than ready to get out of the tunnel and away from the creepy pollen-spewing death traps, and grabs the rope. Steve boosts him up and Mike and Lucas are right there to grab his arms and pull him to safety.

"Damn," Lucas says. "Glad that's over."

Dustin leans over into the hole. Steve is standing at the bottom, just looking at the rope.

"Hey Steve," he says. "You gonna come up?"

"Yeah," Steve says. "Yeah, uh, just...just give me a minute."

Dustin frowns. "Is he okay?" Lucas says.

"Yeah," Dustin says, but it's just an automatic response now. In fact, he's pretty sure Steve is not okay.

"Do you need help?" Mike asks.

"No, I've got it," Steve says, then hoists himself onto the rope. He lets out a strangled yelp and tugs himself a little higher, high enough for them to reach him. Dustin leans over and grabs an arm and Mike does the same, but Steve is *really* heavy.

"Argh!" Dustin yells. "He's slipping!" Lucas and Max reach in to grab whatever they can get ahold of, and the four of them together manage to get Steve up and over the rim of the hole. Then they all just lay there in a jumble, panting.

"That," Max says after a moment, "*sucked*."

They untangle themselves and Steve immediately stands, mostly straight, and holds a hand out to Max. "Keys," he says, "now." Max looks like she might say something for half a second before plopping the keys into his hand with a little glare.

Then the headlights get really bright, blinding in their intensity, and Dustin swears passionately.

"What was that?" Max says after they die down a little.

"I think it was Eleven," Mike says. He looks at Dustin and smiles. "I think that means she did it!" Dustin lets out a whoop and they end up in a big group hug with Steve in the middle.

"Okay, okay," Steve says after a second, shoving them off of him. "Let's go."

"You sure you're okay to drive?" Dustin says. Steve shoots him a look, which probably would have been more intimidating if his face wasn't so banged up.

"More okay than *you guys*," Steve hisses. "Get in." Mike, Lucas, and Max clamber into the back without any argument, and Dustin realizes it's because Steve is *his* friend more than any of theirs. It makes him more than a little bit proud.

Steve starts the car, then looks down with a low curse and picks up the brick Max had had on the accelerator. "Really?" he says, and hands it back to her. She takes it with a grin.

Steve shakes his head and puts the car in gear, then backs out of the pumpkin patch. It's a lot smoother than their ride in, that's for sure. The drive back is mostly uneventful - Steve turns the radio on and they all sing as loud as they can when the Ghostbusters theme comes on - until pretty close to Will's house, when the car swerves suddenly

before correcting again.

"What the hell!" Mike yells. Dustin looks up at Steve, alarmed when he realizes Steve's head is drooping.

"Hey, hey, wake up man!" he yells, and Steve jerks his head up again. "Stop the car!" Steve pulls over and turns to face Dustin. For the first time in this whole thing, he looks *scared*.

"I don't - 'm sorry," he says, and his voice is doing that weird slurring thing from earlier.

"It's okay, it's okay," Dustin says. "Just - just come around here and Max is going to drive us the rest of the way. Right Max?"

"Y-yeah," she says. "Of course." Dustin gets out and runs around to the other side, where Steve is trying to climb out of the car.

"Come on buddy," he says, tucking his arm around Steve's waist and pulling Steve's arm across his shoulders. We're almost there."

"Yeah," Steve mumbles. Max slides into the driver's seat and puts her brick back down, and Dustin squeezes into the front with Steve. As soon as the door closes Max peels out and Lucas leans forward.

"How is he?" he asks.

"I - I don't know," Dustin says.

They get Steve out of the car, barely, and into the house and onto the couch, where Dustin sits next to him and holds the cold compress to his face a little desperately. Billy is still on the floor.

"What now?" Mike says. "Should we call an ambulance?"

"Phone's gone," Lucas says, holding up the wiring where Nancy ripped the phone from the wall.

"Shit," Dustin says. "Shit shit shit *shit*."

"Mrs. Byers and the Sheriff will be back soon though, right?" Mike says. "He'll be fine until then. Right?"

Lucas shrugs and Dustin bites his lip. "Yeah," Dustin says. "Sure."

"I'll - I'll go see if I can find some more band-aids," Lucas says.

"I'll help," Max says.

Dustin just holds on a little tighter.

2. Chapter 2

Notes for the Chapter:

And here is Hopper's chapter! It's a lot longer than the first, but that seemed like the natural spot to split it. :) Thank you so much for your response to chapter one, and I hope you enjoy!

The first thing Hopper does after Eleven - Jane - closes the gate in what is probably the freakiest thing he's ever seen (which is saying a lot), is call Joyce on the radio. She confirms that Will is shadow-monster free and that they're heading back to their house to meet up with the other kids and change into clothes less saturated with sweat.

"We did it kiddo," he says, and can't help ruffling Eleven's hair, even if it isn't as fluffy as it used to be.

There's a blue car in front of the house that he doesn't recognize when he pulls up, and he frowns. Eleven goes to open her door but he holds a hand up and exits carefully, a hand on his gun. He's startled when the front door to the house bursts open and Mike runs out.

"Finally!" he says. Hopper assumes he's talking about seeing El again, but to his surprise the kid beckons them inside almost desperately. "He's hurt! You've gotta help!" Hopper glances at El and runs toward the house.

"Who's hurt? What happened? Who the hell is that?"

There's a kid, big, on the floor and apparently unconscious, and Hopper doesn't think he's ever seen him. He kneels down next to him.

"No, it's Steve!" Mike says.

"Harrington?" Hopper says. He'd been fine when they left.

"Yeah, Billy came in and just beat the shit out of him and he was gonna hurt Lucas, but Max gave him some of Will's sedative stuff," Mike says in one breath.

"Okay," Hopper says, rolling the kid - Billy - onto his side. Whatever he did, Hopper's not going to let him accidentally aspirate. "How's Steve?" he asks, getting to his feet.

"He looks like shit," Mike says. He leads the way into the next room and Hopper stops dead once he sees Steve. Shit is a pretty apt description, turns out. He appears to be barely conscious and is leaning against Dustin, who looks close to tears.

"Hey Dustin, Steve," he says, kneeling in front of them. Mike and El cluster in the doorway, watching anxiously. He doesn't know where Lucas and Max are. "I'm gonna take a look at you, alright? Can you tell me what happened?"

Steve groans a little but doesn't say anything.

Dustin sniffls and clears his throat. "Billy came and he was looking for Max."

"Mm-hmm," Hopper says. Steve's hair is matted with blood and he can feel a knot forming underneath it. Steve grunts when his fingers brush over it. "Sorry kid," Hopper mutters under his breath.

"Steve tried to stop him. But Billy pushed him over and kicked him, and then he came in and tried to beat up Lucas."

"He kicked him?" Hopper says.

"Yeah, but I didn't see where."

"That's okay," Hopper says. "I'm gonna just take a look at under your shirt, okay Steve?"

"Okay," Steve says, though Hopper seriously doubts he has any idea what he's agreeing to.

Hopper lifts Steve's shirt and lets out a low whistle at the bruising already showing up on Steve's right side. He hopes there aren't any busted ribs or, God forbid, internal bleeding.

"And then Steve tried to stop him from hitting Lucas but Billy hit him in the head with a plate."

Hopper winces. That explains the knot.

"And then—" Dustin stops talking for a second and clears his throat again.

Hopper looks up at the interruption, and sees Dustin swiping at his eyes. He sets a hand on Dustin's knee. "Hey, it's okay. We're going to get him help. Can you tell me what happened next?"

"Billy started just, just punching the shit out of his face, like a million times."

"At least ten," Mike pipes up from the doorway. "I - I counted."

Shit. Hopper looks at Steve's face again, holds his head carefully in his hands and tilts it back and forth, and tries to keep his expression calm. Steve's pupils are blown and he doesn't seem to be tracking very well. Shiiiiit.

"We found this," Lucas says, coming into the room and holding out a first aid kit. Kid looks almost as terrified as Dustin, and Hopper makes a note to talk to him later. Getting attacked is scary enough without seeing another person beat half to death in front of you on top of it.

"Thanks guys," Hopper says, taking the kit from fingers that are ever so slightly trembling. "But I think this might be a little beyond my capabilities. Steve is gonna need to take a little trip to the ER."

Dustin lets out a little sob and covers his eyes.

"Hey, no need for that," Hopper says. "He's gonna be fine, remember?"

"But I dragged him to the tunnels and I kept saying he was okay, but he wasn't and maybe I made things worse! I should have known!"

"Hang on," Hopper says. "What tunnels?"

Dustin shakes his head and swipes a hand under his nose.

"Mike? What's he talking about?"

"We - well, we knew you'd need a distraction, so we went down to the hole by the pumpkin patch and we lit it on fire."

Hopper takes a deep breath, counts to ten, and forces his fists to unclench. "Okay. Okay. This is a conversation we can have later. But Steve went with you? Like this?"

They all nod. Hopper sighs.

"He seemed okay," Lucas says. "He led us and pushed us all out of the hole."

"He was ready to protect me from the demo-dogs," Dustin sniffles.

"M okay," Steve says, waving a hand at what he probably hopes is the kids but is actually closer to the window.

"Yeah, maybe not," Dustin says.

Hopper is trying to formulate a response to the tunnel-traversing, demo-dog-facing revelation that just got dropped on him- preferably one that keeps his voice at a conversational level since the kids seem fairly traumatised already- when another car pulls up. All the kids but Dustin clamber outside to greet the Byers and Nancy; Dustin just looks up at him with watery eyes.

"Is he really going to be okay?" he whispers. "No bullshit."

Hopper inhales. "No bullshit? I don't know for sure. But I think so."

"You're taking him to the hospital?"

Hopper sighs. He's exhausted, physically and emotionally, and honestly wants to just go to his cabin and go to bed with El safely tucked in in her room. But Steve needs help. Hell, he'd been trying to protect some of the most stubborn kids in Hawkins and managed to do a good job of it. If anyone deserves help, it's Steve Harrington.

"Yeah kid, I'm going to take him in."

Dustin sets his face in an expression that Hopper is starting to recognize as one of pure determination. "I'm coming too. I'll call my

mom and tell her I'm staying the night here."

"Okay kid. I'm gonna go talk to the others, let them know what's going on. You watch out for Steve until I get back, okay? Try to keep him awake."

"Okay," Dustin says, then, "Oh, and Nancy ripped the phone out of the wall, so do you have a phone I can use?"

"You can call from the hospital."

Dustin nods his assent, so Hopper heads into the kitchen where Joyce and Will are just walking in.

"Hey," Joyce says, an arm around Will's shoulders. She still looks haunted - probably will for a while, and if she doesn't have PTSD after what happened to Bob he'll be surprised - but smiles at him, really smiles, for the first time in months.

"Hey," Hopper says.

"Hey," Joyce answers. She lets go of Will, who is quickly engulfed by his friends, and steps closer to Hopper. He leans in and hugs her, sighing as she squeezes back.

"It's been a long - well, a long year," Joyce murmurs. "It feels like this weight has been lifted off my back, even with...everything. With Bob." Her voice cracks and she buries her face in his shoulder. Hopper hugs her tighter.

"I know," he says. "I know." He also knows that it will ease after time, that sharp pang of loss and grief, and also how much it sucks until then. Still, he has a bigger fish to fry right now.

"So, the kids had a bit of a dust up while we were out."

"Yeah, about that," Joyce says, wiping under her eyes. "Who the hell is the kid in my front room?"

Hopper grimaces. "That would be Max's older brother. He tried to attack Lucas, Steve tried to stop him, and, well, Steve didn't exactly win."

"What does that mean, he didn't win?"

Hopper lowers his tone. "He got the shit beat out of him. Definitely a concussion and some stitches, possibly some broken bones, and if we're really unlucky, internal bleeding. I've got to take him to the ER."

Joyce covers her mouth with her hand. "Okay. Okay. Do you need anything from me? What do you need me to do?"

"Hey, hey, I've got this taken care of, okay? You don't need to worry about anything."

An exclamation from Nancy indicates that she's finally walked into the other room and spotted Steve. Hopper winces.

"Are you taking him to the hospital?" Nancy demands, stomping back into the kitchen.

"Yep," Hopper says.

"I'm coming too."

Hopper does not sigh. "Why not," he says instead.

"His parents are out of town and I'm not going to just- wait, what?"

"Get anything you need," Hopper says. "I'm going to talk to El and then we're leaving."

Nancy nods and heads off as Joyce drifts back towards Will, and Hopper catches El's eye and beckons her over.

"I have to take Steve to the hospital," he says. El nods.

"He protected them."

"Yeah, he did," Hopper says. "From the kid on the floor in there. You saw him?" El nods again, her face serious.

"Yes."

"Good. I don't feel comfortable leaving him here, but I have to take

Steve in and I can't just ask any other officers to come over." He had considered just cuffing Billy, but slapping handcuffs on a kid who was unconscious and who could start vomiting or wake up disoriented and hurt himself didn't sit well with him. "If he wakes up and wants to leave, that's fine. But if he wakes up and looks like he might hurt someone, do you think you would be able to stop him?"

El shoots him a look.

"Okay, I know that you can, but do you want to? I don't want to put pressure on you to do anything you don't feel comfortable with."

El actually considers it for a moment, glancing at Billy on the floor and then back towards the room that contains Steve. "Okay," she says after a moment. "I'll stop him but I won't hurt him. I don't - I don't want to hurt him."

Hopper offers her a smile. "That's just fine," he says. "Just fine." Inwardly, he's beaming with pride, but also makes another note on his things-to-talk-to-Eleven-about list.

"Oh, and I'm probably not going to be back tonight, so if you would rather - if you'd rather stay here with your friends than go back to the cabin, that would be okay."

She grins broadly and flings her arms around his neck.

"Thank you," she says. He chuckles and pats her back.

"I think you've earned it," he says. "But I need to go now. I'll be back by tomorrow at the latest, okay?"

"Yes," she says. "Go help Steve."

"I will."

She bounds off, probably to tell Mike the good news, and Hopper heads back in to see his newest charge. To his dismay, Steve has graduated from confusion to puking in a bowl while Dustin tries simultaneously to comfort him and, from the looks of it, avoid vomiting himself.

"You're okay, that's okay buddy, oh, eww, that one was pretty gross, oh man. Son of a bitch. But it's okay, don't worry about it..."

Hopper grimaces and Dustin looks up at him with a look of desperation mingled with relief.

"So at least he's awake?" he says as Hopper approaches. "But then this started."

Steve looks up with unfocused eyes. "Hey," he says. "Sorry."

"Don't worry about it, kid," Hopper says. "We're gonna get you to the ER now. Think you can stand up?"

Steve doesn't answer immediately, instead bending over and retching again. He looks up again and slurs out something Hopper can't understand. Hopper's stomach sinks, but he swallows down the alarm for Dustin's sake.

"What was that Steve? I didn't quite catch it." Miserably, Steve holds up the bowl.

"Oh yeah, you can bring that with you," Dustin says. "Better than puking in Hopper's truck."

"Yes, it is," Hopper says. "Okay, well, looks like you might need a hand to get out, huh? Dustin, do you want to help him sit up? Then I'm going to help him stand."

Dustin nods and gently prods Steve into an upright position. Hopper grabs Steve's arm and pulls, quickly drawing Steve into his side and grabbing him around the waist. He's not entirely surprised when Jonathan, who has been quietly watching this happen, ducks under Steve's other arm. Steve swings his wobbly head towards Jonathan.

"Oh, hey," he says.

"Hey," Jonathan says. Hopper makes eye contact and nods his thanks, and then they lurch and stumble toward the door. Dustin is right behind them and Nancy ahead, holding the door open.

"You're doing good, kid," Hopper says as they make it outside.

"Almost there." Steve groans in response. Dustin rushes ahead of them and yanks open the truck's door, then slides inside.

"This should be easier than last time," Dustin says from inside the cab. "You don't have to try to get into the back seat."

"Last time?" Jonathan echoes.

"You don't want to know," Hopper says.

"Okay Steve, we're just going to get you in the truck now."

Steve looks up in alarm. "Who's driving?" He demands it in the clearest words he's managed since Hopper got back.

"Whoa," Hopper says.

"It's okay!" Dustin shouts. "It's just Hopper, it's okay."

"Just Hopper?" Hopper says, already certain he doesn't want to know the answer to this. Steve is muttering in agitation next to him, and after a second he realizes he's hearing a chant of "not Max not Max" on repeat.

"Not Max?" Hopper repeats, his voice rising a few decibels. He glares at Dustin. "I'm going to assume that doesn't mean what it sounds like." Dustin shakes his head.

"It sure doesn't!" he chirps, in the least convincing lie Hopper has ever heard.

"Good," Hopper grumbles. "Alright Steve, it's just going to be me driving. Think you can get in now?"

"K," Steve says. Jonathan lets go of him and Hopper helps him into the truck, and Dustin helps him scoot over. Nancy gives Jonathan a hug and a quick kiss on the cheek, then slides in after Steve, shutting the door with finality.

Hopper heads around to the other side and climbs in. Dustin is tucked right up against his side, with Steve leaning against him and Nancy clutching his hand on the other. What a weird team they make. Then

again, since the Upside-Down shit started a year ago, all he's done is work with people he'd never imagined working with.

"How you holding up, Dustin?" he asks.

"I'm okay," Dustin says. "I'll be glad when this is over though."

"I bet," Hopper says. "Those tunnels are kinda creepy, huh?" Dustin glances at him sideways as if suspecting a trap. Finally he sighs.

"Yeah, they are," he says. "We had goggles and masks on, but this thing spit like, pollen of death in my face. It was pretty freaky."

Hopper snorts. "You can say that again." Inwardly, he grimaces; things could have gone so differently for those kids. He doesn't think they remotely realize how narrowly they avoided disaster.

"Steve, how you doing?"

"Mm," Steve says.

"Hey, Steve, wake up," Nancy says, patting at his face. Dustin seems to pick up on the growing panic in the cab and shifts a little.

"Tired," Steve says, and slumps even further, boneless, against Dustin.

"Whoa, whoa, hey! Shit!" Dustin yelps.

"Steve? Steve!" Nancy yells. Hooper glances at them sideways. Steve's head lolls as Nancy shakes his shoulders.

"Okay, okay, hey! Calm down! Getting hysterical isn't going to help," Hopper says. Dustin and Nancy both shut up, but he's pretty sure they're both sniffling. "We're gonna be fine."

Hopper flips on the light and radios ahead to the hospital and tries not to panic.

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Turns out that Steve Harrington is quite a bit heavier than Will, not to mention lankier, plus he's difficult to maneuver out of a truck, but

Hopper manages and carries him to the entrance of the ER. There are all sorts of hospital personnel waiting for them, and it's only a matter of seconds before Steve is settled on a stretcher and being wheeled into the ER, leaving him with two tear-streaked and crestfallen kids.

He knows what comes next: waiting, paperwork, phone calls, waiting. Looking at Dustin and Nancy clinging to each other in front of the truck, he's wondering what in the hell he just signed up for, and, more importantly, what possessed him to do so.

"Okay, you guys head on in and I'm gonna go park the truck. You can just sit wherever there are seats." They walk in together, Nancy's arm around Dustin's shoulders. All this Upside Down shit has been the worst, and Hopper can't say he'd do it again if he had the chance, but it has had the effect of bringing together a lot of people. Hell, he'd still be drinking himself to sleep every night in the old house instead of eating Eggos with El if it weren't for Hawkins Lab.

The kids are huddled together in a couple of plastic chairs when he walks in and they both pop up as soon as they see him.

"What now?" Nancy says.

"When can I see him?" says Dustin.

Hopper holds up his hands. "Either of you been in a waiting room situation like this before?"

"Yeah, with Will. Last year."

"Oh. Yeah. Well, it's a lot of waiting. Probably around the same time as waiting for Will, plus filling out paperwork because his parents are out of town and I'm responsible for him right now. Then it'll just be some more waiting."

There's a moment of silence. "Okay," Nancy says.

"Yeah," Dustin says. "Okay."

Hopper looks at them; they both appear to be utterly exhausted. "Look, how about I take you back to the Byers' house once I'm done with the paperwork, huh?"

"No!" Nancy says. "No. I'm staying."

"Me too," Dustin says. Hopper sighs.

"Okay then."

xxxx

Hopper uses Steve's ID card from the wallet one of Steve's nurses gives him to fill out the basic info. Nancy helps with some of it - "Allergies? Shit, I don't know. I was a terrible girlfriend, how did I never ask him that?" - and the rest he has to leave blank. He'll have to call Mr. Harrington's work in the morning to get the number of whatever hotel he's at. Nancy said it's somewhere in Maryland, which doesn't actually help very much. Dustin watches the whole thing go down with half-lidded eyes. He's called his parents already, and Hopper gives him maybe ten minutes before he's down for the count.

Nancy yawns as he finishes up and heads up to the counter. She's probably got a half hour in her before she's out too.

"Hi Linda," he says, handing the clipboard with its stupid flowery pen back to her. "Is there anywhere I can get a coffee?"

She indicates an old coffee maker in the corner, next to the stack of magazines that look like they're at least ten years old. "Thanks," he says. The coffee looks pretty shitty, but he still pours himself a cup and ambles back over to where Dustin is now sleeping with his head leaning against the wall, and Nancy is bent over with her hands in her lap.

"Hey," she says without looking up.

"Hey." He sips his coffee. Yep, pretty shitty.

"I don't - I didn't think about this. When I broke up with him."

Hopper rolls his eyes heavenward. Of all the things he's been through tonight, rehashing a teenage love triangle will be the worst, he can tell already.

Nancy sighs. "I guess I was just so caught up in my grief and- and

guilt for Barb that I didn't think about how this has all impacted him, and I still don't really understand it, but. But I guess I didn't ask."

"Well," Hopper says. He glances at Dustin, whose mouth is now hanging open and who looks uncomfortable as hell, and guides his head to rest on Hopper's shoulder. "You've still got time."

"Yeah," Nancy says. "I guess so."

xxxx

Hopper comes awake when a nurse jostles his shoulder. "Sheriff? Steve Harrington is getting settled into his room. He's asking for you."

"What?" Hopper says, and blinks before he remembers where he is, and that he currently has two kids sleeping on him. "Guys. Wake up," he says, nudging Dustin's head.

"Huh?" Dustin says, then bolts upright. "Steve!"

"Is okay," Hopper says. "We can see him soon."

"He's okay?" Nancy repeats. "Thank God!"

"Alright, let's pack it up," he says. They troop after the nurse, their strange band of three, and end up parked outside room 312 while they get Steve settled. The doctor comes out and smiles at Hopper.

"You're here for Steve?"

"Yep," Hopper says.

"Great. He should be just fine. He's got a concussion we want to keep an eye on tonight, and a fractured cheekbone that we'll have to operate on in the near future."

"Thought so," Hopper says. "Those hurt like a bitch."

"I'm sure they do," the doctor says. "We also had to stitch up some cuts on his face and set two of his fingers, and he has a fractured rib. Whoever beat him up sure did a thorough job."

"He did," Hopper says. "But bottom line, he's going to be okay?"

"Barring any complications with the head injury, which we don't anticipate, he'll be fine. He's been asking after you."

"Great," Hopper says, and the sigh of relief he lets out is a genuine one. "Okay."

"Oh, I should warn you, he's pretty disoriented still," the doctor says. "Kept talking about a monster. Not the weirdest thing I've heard after a head injury, but it can be disconcerting to family members."

Hopper manages not to smile. "I'm sure it is."

xxxx

Steve is a little surprised when Nancy is the first person through the door.

"Hey?" Steve says. He's feeling pretty foggy, but he's also pretty sure they broke up, like, a couple days ago.

"Hey," Nancy says. She sits on the edge of his bed and fiddles with the blanket. "I just wanted to thank you," she says. "For protecting the kids. For protecting Mike."

Steve snorts and immediately regrets it as his head throbs angrily. "Didn't do so hot at that, in case you missed it."

"No," she says. "You did great. I'm so proud of you."

"Well," he says. "Thanks."

"And I also wanted to apologize. For what I said at the party the other night. I don't think you're bullshit, Steve, and I don't think you were a shitty boyfriend. I just think we're both trying to work through things, you know? And it's pretty intense stuff, too. So, maybe it's probably not the right time for us? But I want you to know I will always be grateful for what you did tonight."

"Thanks," Steve says again, because his brain can't think of anything else.

Nancy leans down and kisses what is probably the only spot on his forehead that doesn't hurt, and grins. "There's somebody else here to see you."

For a split second he thinks it's his mom, that somehow she came back from the conference, but he realizes pretty quickly that that probably isn't the case. His disappointment is mostly abated when Dustin's curly head peeks into the room and a grin lights up his face.

"Steve!" he yells, and bounds into the room with all the energy of a thirteen year old boy. "I'm so glad you're not dead!"

Steve chuckles. "Yeah, me too," he says. "Hey, thanks for earlier. I'm still kinda fuzzy, but I'm pretty sure you took care of me in the car, and probably before that too."

"And after," Dustin says. "I was there while you puked."

"Oh good," Steve says. He's blushing, but he's also fairly certain you can't tell underneath all the stitches and bruises and shit.

"You were pretty badass down in the tunnel," Dustin says. "Especially when we thought the demo-dogs were gonna eat us."

"Yeah, well, couldn't let you get eaten. Who would I call shithead then?"

"Yeah, whatever," Dustin says, but he's still beaming. "Oh, and you totally need, like, a Mr. Miyagi. You got your ass kicked."

"Thanks for noticing," Steve says, gesturing at his face. "I had almost forgotten about it."

"You could be like the Karate Kid. 'Steve-san.' Actually, that doesn't sound as cool as Daniel-san. Steven-san?"

"Hey, nobody calls me Steven," Steve says. "Steve-san is just fine."

"Fine," Dustin says. "It still doesn't sound as cool, though."

"Fine," Steve repeats. It's probably not the concussion that is making him argue with a thirteen year old, but he's gonna blame it on that

anyway.

"Anyway. Hopper is gonna take me and Nancy back to Will's place now that we saw you, but I'll be back tomorrow after I sleep in until, like, noon," Dustin says. "I might bring the other guys too."

"Yeah, whenever is fine," Steve says. "I'm probably getting out of here tomorrow though, so you might just have to come to my place."

Honestly, it would be a nice change of pace from the huge, lonely old house. Not that he'd ever say that to anyone out loud. Ever.

"Excellent! I'll tell the others!" He rushes out and Steve realizes that if anyone hears about him inviting a bunch of thirteen year old nerds to his house he will literally never hear the end of it but also realizes he doesn't care as much as he thought he would.

"Hey kid, I'm gonna take the others home and then come back, okay?" Hopper says, ducking into the room.

"Yeah, of course," Steve says. "I'll probably just sleep anyway."

"Hey," Hopper says, stepping closer. "You did good today."

"Didn't have much of a choice," Steve says. "The little twerps suck you right in."

Hopper barks a laugh. "They sure do," he says. "You might as well buckle up."

Steve shakes his head and sighs. It's gonna be a long semester.

xxxx

He wakes up later, disoriented, and has to throw up again. Someone holds a bowl in front of his face and he feels a warm hand on his shoulder.

"Easy kid, you're okay. They're gonna give you something to help with the nausea in just a second."

Steve settles back into his pillow with a strangled sigh and brings a

hand up to his forehead. A nurse comes in and injects something into his IV, then bustles out again, turning the lights down as she goes.

"Well that sucked."

Hopper chuckles. "Yeah," he says, but doesn't add anything else. Steve supposes there isn't anything else to add.

"Are you just - just gonna sit there all night?" Steve asks. "Because you look pretty tired, and I'm seventeen. I'll be okay."

Hopper stretches his arms above his head. Something in his back pops. "Nowhere else I'd rather be," he says.

"Now you're just lying."

"Maybe," Hopper says with a shrug. "But I'm not about to leave you here alone, so you can keep complaining or shut up and deal with it, your choice."

Steve shifts a little bit. Everything hurts, doesn't matter what position he's in. He gives up after a second. "Guess I'll shut up then."

"Good. Maybe I'll finish this damn crossword."

Steve closes his eyes and tries not to remember the Upside Down, the damn demo-dogs, Billy smiling with bloody teeth. It works for a second. He opens his eyes and shifts again, winces with the movement.

"Something on your mind?" Hopper says.

"No," Steve says. "Yes."

Hopper puts down the crossword book and takes off his reading glasses.

"I just - are you ever, you know, scared? Like, can't sleep at night scared? Because every time I close my eyes I see that demogorgon, or Barb's face at the party, and now there's just new shit to add to the old shit. I just - I just want to go back to how it was. Before."

Hopper exhales slowly. "Son," he says finally, "I was in Vietnam. I sure as hell know what it's like to be scared shitless and to feel like you're never going to not be scared again."

Steve is quiet. He doesn't know what to say, and he would probably do something embarrassing like cry if he tried.

"You won't ever be the same," Hopper says, his voice a little lower. "Not ever. You're changed now - for the better in a lot of ways, Steve. But with time, the fear will dwindle, and you'll start to sleep better, and you won't be scared every time you hear a dog, and you won't have to carry a bat around with you. Just hang in there. You'll be alright."

"Promise?" Steve whispers.

"Yeah kid. I promise."

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks for reading! Come swap theories/head canons with me on tumblr! I'm elspirit023 over there. :)